



Bridging Divides: The Research–Policy–Practice Nexus in Bilingual Education and Bilingual Teacher Education in the United States

Tendiendo puentes: el nexo entre investigación, legislación y práctica educativa en educación bilingüe y formación docente bilingüe en los Estados Unidos

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Abstract

In this article we examine the complex relationship between research, policy, and practice in U.S. bilingual education and bilingual teacher preparation. Although these intimately interrelated fields have made significant scholarly advances and gained international recognition, they continue to experience systemic challenges rooted in contradictions in policy, barriers to implementation, and political tensions. Despite existing research on effective programs and approaches for educating bi-/multilingual learners and preparing future bilingual teachers, misalignments across research, policy, and practice have contributed to persistent gaps in opportunity and achievement for both bi-/multilingual learners and teacher candidates. These issues are especially urgent in today's political climate, where ethnocentric and nativist ideologies threaten institutions such as the U.S. Department of Education Office of English Language Acquisition and a body of robust research developed since the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Bilingual Education Act of 1968, undermining decades of progress. We conclude by making a call for policies that are research-informed, equity-driven, culturally sustainable, and supportive of bilingualism, biliteracy, and the preparation of teachers to serve bi-/multilingual learners in ways that promote their academic achievement and well-being.

Keywords: Bilingual education, bilingual teacher education, research, policy, practice, United States of America

Resumen

En este artículo examinamos la compleja relación entre investigación, legislación y práctica educativa en los ámbitos de la educación bilingüe y de la formación docente bilingüe en los Estados Unidos. Si bien estos campos, íntimamente interrelacionados, han logrado avances académicos significativos y reconocimiento internacional, éstos continúan enfrentando desafíos sistémicos a raíz de contradicciones legislativas, obstáculos en la práctica educativa y tensiones políticas. A pesar de la investigación existente sobre programas y enfoques eficaces para educar a estudiantes bi-/multilingües y preparar a futuros docentes bilingües, las discontinuidades entre investigación, legislación y práctica educativa han producido desigualdades en el acceso y el rendimiento académico de cuyos actores. Esta problemática adquiere particular urgencia en el actual contexto político, donde ideologías etnocéntricas y nativistas amenazan instituciones como la Oficina de Adquisición del Idioma Inglés del Departamento de Educación y décadas de investigación desarrolladas desde la Ley de Derechos Civiles de 1964 y la Ley de Educación Bilingüe de 1968. Concluimos haciendo un llamado a la formulación de marcos legislativos sustentados en la evidencia científica, orientados a la equidad y que promuevan el desempeño académico y el bienestar social y humano tanto de los estudiantes bi-/multilingües en el sector escolar público como de sus docentes.

Palabras clave: Educación bi-/multilingüe, formación docente bi-/multilingüe, investigación, legislación, implementación educativa, Estados Unidos de América

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Introduction

“Research alone is not going to change practice.

Research with the goal of activating people will.

We are going to have to level up!

Tenemos que despertarnos.”

—Dr. Miguel A. Cardona, 12th U.S. Secretary of Education.²

In an ideal world shaped by functionalist and pragmatic principles, educational research, policy, and practice would operate in synergistic and reciprocal ways, each informing and strengthening the others. However, education as an interdisciplinary field of study is deeply complex—unavoidably impacted by competing values and political tensions (Douglass Horsford et al., 2024; Kumashiro, 2020; Saltman, 2018)—and reflects the unrealized potential (or dysfunctions) of a system that has been historically criticized for its lack of efficiency (Callahan, 1964). Bilingual education³ and bilingual teacher education are not exempt from these macro/micro-level dynamics and persistent challenges. Although researchers have offered clear guidance for effective bilingual education, contradictory policies and systemic barriers prevent its full implementation, creating a gap between extant research-based knowledge, policy mandates, and classroom practice (Fránquiz & Jiménez-Castellanos, 2018; Jiménez-Castellanos et al., 2022; Jiménez-Castellanos et al., 2024; Johnson, 2011; Monserrat, 2021; Ortiz & Fránquiz, 2017). This gap, although arguably more pronounced in bilingual education, has been pervasive throughout the history of U.S. education (Tyack & Tobin, 1994; Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

Most concerning, however, is that the ongoing disconnect between research, policy, and practice in educating bi-/multilingual learners in the U.S. contributes to their persistent academic underachievement (Abedi & Gándara, 2006; Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Valenzuela, 1999; Vaughn et al., 2025). As Ortiz and Fránquiz (2017) indicated,

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data consistently show that the average math and reading scores of English Learners (ELs) are lower than those of their non-EL peers (Kena et al., 2016) Given the availability of formulas for ensuring the success of English Learners, why is it that schools struggle to meet federal and state accountability standards for this population? The answer is, at least in part, that education legislation, laws, and policies often contradict, or ignore, the research base on best practices in the education of second language learners... The education of English Learners is compromised

² Exhortation made at the [AERA Bilingual Education Research SIG virtual Town Hall \(August 22, 2025\)](#).

³ We use the term *bilingual education* to refer to (a) programs that serve bilingual and multilingual students, including programs where two languages are employed as the means of instruction; and (b) given foundational literature in the field framed from this conceptual understanding. The term is meant to include dual-language, two-way dual language, and two-way bilingual immersion approaches when these programs are not directly specified. We use bilingual and multilingual to acknowledge students, teachers, or both, in these programs who use more than two languages, recognizing the fact that the term *bilingual* does not fully capture the complex, dynamic language and discourse practices of bilingual and multilingual students (see Tupan & García, in press) and teachers.

by significant gaps between research and practice in such areas as special language program implementation, assessment and instruction, and the preparation of educators who serve English Learners. (p. 1)

These persistent gaps emphasize the urgent need for education policies that are intentionally and explicitly grounded in the existent body of research on the benefits of bilingualism and biliteracy as well as bilingual dual-language education (DLE; August & Hakuta, 1997; Baker & Wright, 2021; Callahan & Gándara, 2014; Collins & Ho, 2020; Collier & Thomas, 2004; Freire et al., 2024; García, 2009; Howard et al., 2018; Kroll & Dussias, 2017; May, 2017; Rolstad et al., 2005a, 2005b). Similarly, the disconnect between research, policy, and practice in the education of bi-/multilingual learners highlights the critical need to design and implement bilingual teacher education programs that are grounded in evidence and are responsive to the realities and exigencies of today's diverse bi-/multilingual classrooms (Faltis & Abedi, 2013; Faltis & Valdés, 2016; Palmer et al., 2019; Peercy et al., 2022; Rodríguez & Villarreal, 2005; Scherzinger & Brahm, 2023).

Despite considerable progress in bilingual education research in the United States—positioning the country as a global leader in knowledge production, influential scholarship, and international research collaboration (Sánchez-Pérez & Manzano-Agugliaro, 2021)—the field is facing potential setbacks. The rise of ethnocentric and nativist ideologies, along with political mandates to designate English as the official language of the United States (Executive Order 14224, 2025) and efforts to eliminate institutions such as the Department of Education and its Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA), represent a significant threat to the continued advancement of the field. For years, OELA has supported English learners and immigrant students by promoting English proficiency, academic success, and bilingualism and biliteracy. It has served as a beacon for the advancement of bilingual education by offering critical policy guidance, funding for educator training and research, and access to valuable resources through the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition. Its elimination threatens to undermine decades of progress in fostering language diversity and educational equity for all learners, particularly for racialized-minoritized bi-/multilingual students in U.S. public schools.

In this article, and from the varied stances, identities, and positionalities we hold as scholar-researchers, we provide a critical analysis of the current social and political landscape of bilingual education in the United States. Particularly, we examine the intersections and disjuncture across the continuum of research, policy, and practice, highlighting key examples that illustrate how these gaps are at play in K-12 bilingual education and bilingual teacher preparation. By interrogating these dimensions, we aim to clarify the current conditions and offer guidance for strengthening the field through educational policies and practices that are research-informed, equity-minded, and culturally and linguistically sustaining. Our analysis is informed by the following research questions: (a) What are key advancements, ongoing challenges, and emerging directions at the intersection of research, policy, and practice in K-12 bilingual education? (b) What are primary developments, persistent challenges, and

future pathways in research, policy, and practice related to bilingual teacher education? (c) How do these challenges and improvements, collectively, inform our understanding of the current landscape of bilingual education and bilingual teacher education as interconnected fields of research, policy, and practice in the United States?

The Research–Policy–Practice Continuum

The research–policy–practice continuum in education refers to the interdependent relationship between educational research, policy development, and the implementation of research-informed practices in school classrooms (Penuel & Gallagher, 2017). This *continuum* or *nexus* emphasizes the importance of understanding how research influences policymaking decisions and, in the same way, how policies shape educational practices at local levels. It highlights the role of research in informing the design of policies that are aimed at improving educational outcomes while simultaneously emphasizing the practical application of research findings in classroom settings (Prøitz et al., 2023). Scholarly research in education—and bilingual education in particular—can and should serve as the foundation for evidence-based policymaking and provide knowledge and insights into effective educational programs, pedagogical practices, and learning processes. However, what complicates the translation of research into policy is the influence of political, social, and economic factors that may not always align with research-based proposals (Schneider & Ingram, 1997). Policies designed at the state or federal level may not always reflect the nuances of local contexts, which leads to potential gaps between research evidence and policy implementation (Honig, 2006).

The role of educators in this continuum is crucial. Teachers, as frontline practitioners, are responsible for translating policies into classroom practices—often with varying degrees of commitment to the intended design, or without the necessary resources, expert content knowledge, or pedagogical expertise to do so. The effectiveness of education policy is contingent on how well it is enacted within the local realities of individual district and school classrooms. Thus, the continuum is not a linear process but rather a reciprocal and iterative cycle, where research informs policy, policy shapes practice, and practice provides feedback that can refine both research and policy (Penuel & Gallagher, 2017). A more integrated relationship among research, policy, and practice is therefore crucial for meaningful, sustainable, and democratic educational reform (Schneider & Ingram, 1997).

A Brief Sociopolitical History of U.S. Bilingual Education

The United States is widely acknowledged as a haven for bilingual individuals (Grosjean, 1982), despite the prevailing belief that it is predominantly monolingual with only a few linguistic minorities that are rapidly diminishing. The interaction among the languages of Native Americans, colonizers, and subsequent immigrants has fostered extensive language contact and lasting bilingualism, including dynamic approaches to bi-/multilingual communication, such as translanguaging (García, 2009; García & Wei, 2014; MacSwan, 2022) and/or code-switching

(Zentella, 1997). Prior to the arrival of Europeans, North America had approximately 500–1,000 Indigenous languages in the 15th century (Grosjean, 1982; Ovando, 2003). Europeans introduced seven colonial languages: English, Spanish, French, German, Dutch, Swedish, and Russian (Grosjean, 1982). The influx of new English-speaking settlers during the 17th and 18th centuries reinforced the dominance and growth of the language. By 1776, the United States had become English-speaking, with 60% of its population being of English descent by 1790 (Grosjean, 1982). Since then, the United States has acquired its current multilingual character through annexation, war, and immigration.

Despite the multitude of languages that coexisted at the time, the founders of the United States did not establish an official language policy (Crawford, 1999).⁴ Over time, language ideology in the United States has shifted because of assimilationist and pluralist policies that have been enacted in response to historical events (Crawford, 2000). On the one hand, pluralist policies view linguistic and cultural diversity as a norm within and across borders and consider diversity as a potential asset for societal transformation. On the other hand, assimilationist policies focus on the formation of a nation-state and prioritize a unifying language and national culture, with monolingualism as the norm (Baker, 2021; Crawford, 2004). These historical “pendulum swings” in policy form the foundation of the contemporary disconnect between research, policy, and practice. Though research has long affirmed the educational, cognitive, and sociocultural benefits of bilingualism (Baker, 2021; García, 2009), U.S. bilingual education policies have failed to reflect this evidence. Weaker models of bilingual education tend to be subtractive, privileging rapid acquisition of English at the expense of the identities and home languages of the students. Stronger, additive models (Bartlett & García, 2011)—such as two-way immersion (TWI) or dual-language immersion—aim to foster bilingualism, biliteracy, academic achievement, and cross-cultural understanding by integrating students from both majority and minoritized language backgrounds (Baker, 2021; Gándara & Hopkins, 2010).

In the United States, English has traditionally been the language of instruction. Until 2025, when English was named as the official language of the United States, the absence of an official language policy led to divergent perspectives and decisions concerning language-related matters such as bilingual education (Crawford, 2004). This divergence has resulted in periods of both acceptance and intolerance toward linguistic diversity. The historical trajectory of bilingual education in the United States can be divided into four distinct periods. First, the Permissive Period (1700s–1880s) saw linguistic assimilation efforts without coercion, with several states passing laws that authorized bilingual education while promoting assimilation (Crawford, 2004; Ovando, 2003). The Restrictive Period (1880s–1960s) witnessed the disappearance of bilingual instruction due to repressive policies, including laws that limited the use of native languages other than English in schools and fined teachers for using them. This period was also marked

⁴ This is no longer the case, because on March 1, 2025, President Donald Trump signed Executive Order 14224, designating English as the official language of the United States. This order rescinded Executive Order 13166, issued by President Bill Clinton in 2000, which required federal agencies to provide language assistance to individuals with limited English proficiency. Under this new executive order, agencies have the discretion to continue offering multilingual services but are no longer mandated to do so.

by Americanization efforts during World Wars I and II (Crawford, 2004; Ovando, 2003). The Opportunist Period (1960s–1980s) emerged as minority groups, driven by the civil rights movement, advocated against assimilation. Growing concerns about linguistic inclusion in the mid-20th century led to federal initiatives such as the Bilingual Education Act of 1965, which sought to address the educational needs of linguistically diverse children (Ovando, 2003). The 1974 Supreme Court case *Lau v. Nichols* underscored educational equity (Crawford, 2004). Arising from a class action suit filed by 1,800 Chinese students, the decision addressed claims of discrimination due to language barriers that hindered academic achievement. Relying on the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the justices ruled that equal treatment of English-speaking and non-English-speaking students did not ensure equal educational opportunity, thus violating the civil rights of non-English-speaking students. This decision ended previous “sink-or-swim” practices and led to the Equal Educational Opportunities Act in August 1974. The Lau Remedies stipulated that bilingual education be offered in all districts with at least 20 English language learners of the same language (Crawford, 2004; Wright, 2013). Finally, the Dismissive Period (1980s–present) is characterized by a surge in restrictions that include the passing of anti-bilingual education voter initiatives in California (1998), Arizona (2000), and Massachusetts (2002), along with the repeal of the Bilingual Education Act following the enactment of the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.⁵ The Bilingual Education Act has undergone multiple re-authorizations, with modifications that have reflected social tensions and political debates surrounding bilingual education (Wright, 2013). Criticism of the federal Lau Remedies prompted political activists nationwide to advocate for a return to “sink-or-swim” practices, leading to the emergence of anti-bilingual education pressure groups such as U.S. English, English Only, and English First. A debate ensued regarding the duration, if any, for which students’ non-English native languages should be allowed before transitioning to an all-English classroom environment. Despite facing political challenges during the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, bilingual education persists in the United States (Wright, 2013).

These four periods, shaped by historical, social, and political dynamics, reflect the evolving landscape of bilingual education in the United States. Nonetheless, the disconnect between research and policy in bilingual education is evident in the goals for bilingual programs. According to Flores and García (2017), bilingual programs were initially designed to instill pride in Latinx and other racialized–minoritized communities, with one of the aims being to boost students’ self-esteem and academic performance. However, these efforts are undermined by school environments that marginalize multilingual students and by implicit messaging that devalues their communities. Furthermore, promoting bilingual education to influential parents can lead to the exclusion of minoritized students, treating Latinx children as commodities to enhance the profiles of White middle-class students (Cervantes-Soon et al., 2021; Flores & García, 2017; Valdéz et al., 2016). Flores and García (2017) emphasized that the effectiveness of bilingual

⁵ Writing in 2003, Ovando referred to the “dismissive period” as the “present” state of bilingual education policy dynamics; however, we are mindful that in 2025, and given the “signs of the times,” we are most likely moving into perhaps a “repressive” period in bilingual and multilingual education; this period may be further away from Ronald Reagan’s and George W. Bush’s (father and son) “restrictive” and “dismissive” approaches.

education is hindered by structural barriers and significant inequalities between low-income Latinx students and their White middle-class peers.

The enduring legacy of institutional racism and marginalization primarily benefits the White English-speaking community through DLE programs. These programs often reinforce language hierarchies by privileging standardized English and sidelining home languages, something that further marginalizes low-income Latinx families. Influenced by neoliberal ideologies that emphasize individualism, competition, and market orientation, Two-Way Dual Language (TWDL) programs can neglect minoritized students and prioritize the accumulation of human capital (Bernstein et al., 2021; Cervantes-Soon, 2014). The commodification of bilingual education enhances White students' multilingual abilities for global economic competition (Flores & García, 2017). In their analysis of media narratives about TWI programs in Georgia and North Carolina, Cervantes-Soon et al. (2021) found that neoliberal narratives of global human capital, global corporate interest, and White privilege existed and were echoed by educators and parents. The media narratives showed that, although bilingual programs in these two states were initially designed for language-minoritized students, they were co-opted by White English speakers to gain advantages in the global economy.

Palmer et al. (2019) have argued that the three main goals of TWDL—academic achievement, bilingualism and biliteracy, and sociocultural competence—are insufficient. They advocate for a fourth goal, critical consciousness, to help stakeholders prioritize equity and support a more integrated and socially just society. Critical consciousness can be understood as “the ability to read the world (Freire, 1970): to reflectively discern the differences in power and privilege rooted in social relationships that structure inequalities and shape the material conditions of our lives; to read the world also includes recognizing one's role in these dynamics” (Palmer et al., 2019, p. 123). Palmer and colleagues identify four elements as central to critical consciousness in TWDL: (a) continuously interrogating power—“make ongoing efforts to interrogate and transform existing power structures, especially considering that U.S. schools operate within and are shaped by a context defined by English hegemony and middle-class norms” (p. 124); (b) historicizing schools—“deconstructing mainstream explanations of the past and foregrounding individuals' and communities' local histories” (p. 125); (c) critical listening—“[engaging] students, educators, and families with others for meaningful and transformative connection” (p. 126); and (d) engaging with discomfort—“experiencing discomfort in realizing one's role in social [injustice]” (p. 127).

Alongside the power imbalances that Valdéz et al. (2016) highlighted and the differences between affluent and low-income families in bilingual education services, Dorner et al. (2021) contended that policy implementation is shaped by global, neocolonial, and monoglossic ideologies that have historically marginalized and erased the languages of minoritized groups. In a study of dual bilingual programs in three regions—the Midwest, the Southeast, and Texas—Dorner et al. (2021) found that gentrification was present in three different two-way bilingual immersion (TWBI) classrooms where native languages were often sidelined or reduced in practice in favor of monoglossic discourses. Although these programs aimed to prioritize English learners, there was a significant demand for TWBI programs from White families,

whereas families of color faced extra obstacles such as transportation policies that impeded their ability to enroll in programs where Spanish was the medium of instruction. Deficit perspectives on children of color led to their language practices being stigmatized, whereas White English-speaking practices were celebrated. Dorner et al. ultimately illustrated the intersections of monoglossic discourses and raciolinguistic perspectives (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Rosa & Flores, 2017) in bilingual programs, defined as “to *race language* and *language race* [...] —that is, to view race through the lens of language, and vice versa—to gain a better understanding of language and the process of racialization” (Alim et al., 2016, pp. 1–2).⁶

As we interrogate how long-standing ideological tensions continue to manifest as policy contradictions and implementation challenges in K–12 bilingual education and bilingual teacher preparation, understanding this sociopolitical history is critical to our aims in this work. Despite decades of research that has affirmed the benefits of bilingualism and biliteracy, the persistence of inequitable practices and marginalizing ideologies point to a fundamental reality: Education policy, particularly in bilingual education, remains as much a politicized project as an educational one (Moore, 2021).

Research–Policy–Practice and K–12 Bilingual Education

Bilingual education in U.S. K–12 instruction is at a complex intersection of research-based knowledge, shifting policy mandates, and diverse implementation practices. Despite decades of scholarship that demonstrate the benefits of bilingual education for emergent bi-/multilingual students—including cognitive, academic, and sociocultural gains—educational policy and classroom practice remain misaligned with that research. In this section we explore how these misalignments manifest in the field and highlight how contradictions in policy, challenges in implementation, and political forces continue to constrain the transformative potential of bilingual education.

Research Foundations Undermined by Restrictive Policies

The research base on bilingual education has long emphasized the time, pedagogical approaches, and linguistic rights needed to effectively support emerging bi-/multilingual students. Le Menestrel’s (2020) review of the National Academies’ *Promising Futures* report (2017) reinforced the consensus that language proficiency—especially academic language—takes 5 to 7 years to develop, yet U.S. policies overlook this developmental arc. The lack of a shared understanding or clear definition of “academic language” not only creates further disconnection but also restricts the development of equitable approaches to instruction. These policy blind spots are not neutral; they are shaped by deeper ideological forces. Drawing on critical frameworks such

⁶ Urciuoli (2001) referred to these dynamics as “linguistic racialization” and drew on Lippi-Green (1997) to discuss how “in effect, race has been [mapped] . . . onto language” (p. 201). Zentella (1997) has conducted foundational work in language and race in the United States from the perspective of Puerto Rican children growing up in “El Barrio” (the South Bronx, New York City).

as critical race theory and Latino critical race theory, Chávez-Moreno (2019) has shown how policies since No Child Left Behind (2002) have reinforced White supremacist and English-dominant ideologies that have resulted in the marginalization of Latinx and language-minoritized students. Citing studies by Mitchell (2005), DuBord (2010), and Galindo (2011), Chávez-Moreno has underscored how bilingual education has been weaponized, either by eliminating access altogether or by being co-opted by elite groups to reinforce stratification. These findings have highlighted how ethnocentric and nativist ideologies, embedded in ostensibly race-neutral policies, systematically undermine the educational equity that research supports.

Implementation Challenges and School-Choice Tensions

Even when policy moves in the direction of support for bilingualism, practices on the ground diverge sharply. One example is Proposition 227 in California, which significantly curtailed access to bilingual instruction after it passed in 1998. Matas and Rodríguez (2014) documented how the number of English learners who received primary language instruction plummeted from 30% to 35% of students in the late 1990s to under 5% by 2011. These reductions not only contradicted established research but also deepened stereotypes about academic underachievement among bilingual learners. In a more recent context, Bernstein et al. (2021) explored how dual-language bilingual education (DLBE) programs have become entangled in school-choice dynamics and neoliberal education reforms. In states such as Texas, Arizona, and California, DLBE is increasingly used as a competitive strategy to recruit students and secure funding. Pressed to “create a brand” for their schools in an increasingly competitive market, administrators implement DLBE not solely for its educational merit but as a response to financial pressures and competition in enrollment. These practices risk turning equity-based programming into vehicles for stratification, especially when access to DLBE programs becomes uneven along racial and socioeconomic lines. Yet Bernstein et al. also found that some school leaders view DLBE as a mechanism for social transformation, which indicates that transformative possibilities still exist even within contradictions in policy.

Local Resistance and Policy Mediation

Despite these structural and policy constraints, educators and school leaders continue to demonstrate agency in adapting or resisting policies to meet the needs of bi-/multilingual learners. Gumina (2022), for example, has drawn attention to how bilingual teachers navigate high-stakes policy demands through both overt and improvisational means: Teachers engage in “hidden transcripts” of resistance by quietly modifying curriculum and pedagogy to preserve students’ linguistic identities while maintaining surface-level compliance (p. 38). This process underscores the essential role of teacher agency in sustaining inclusive educational practices within restrictive environments. Other studies have brought to light localized efforts to reimagine policy enactment. Koyama and Bartlett (2011) examined Gregorio Luperón High School in New York City, where educators strategically appropriated policy language to preserve and expand

their bilingual program. By centering language acquisition as a community-based, sociocultural process, the school resisted federal mandates and accountability structures that would have otherwise dismantled their bilingual approach. Sánchez et al. (2022) similarly demonstrated how school leaders in New York navigated bilingual education policy through three phases: setting a vision, surviving English-only mandates, and restoring biliteracy programming under more favorable policy conditions. Their work underscores the power of local leadership in translating research-informed values into sustained school practice.

Toward Research-Informed and Equity-Driven Policy and Practice

This body of research has illustrated the ongoing tensions and misalignments across the research–policy–practice continuum in K–12 bilingual education. Despite robust evidence of the value of bilingualism and biliteracy, U.S. education policies frequently reflect assimilationist, market-driven, or deficit-based logics. These ideologies continue to shape how policies are enacted, how programs are designed, and how students experience bilingual education. Yet within these constraints, school leaders, educators, and teacher preparation programs are forging pathways toward equity. They are resisting monolingual norms, sustaining practices that are culturally and linguistically responsive, and leveraging knowledge and awareness of policy to advocate for systemic change. As this analysis reveals, closing the gap between research, policy, and practice requires more than alignment; it requires a reimagining of educational policy as a tool for linguistic justice and social transformation.

Bilingual Teacher Education and Research–Policy–Practice

The field of bilingual teacher education is shaped by a complex interplay of research, policy, and practice that is marked by significant misalignments and persistent challenges, much like K–12 bilingual education. Although research has offered clear guidance on effective preparation for bilingual teachers (Aquino-Sterling et al., 2022; Flores et al., 2011; Palmer, 2018; Ramírez & Faltis, 2020; Tian & King, 2023; Valenzuela, 2016), state policies and certification structures reflect monolingual, racialized, and assimilationist ideologies that marginalize linguistically and racially diverse teacher candidates. In this section we critically examine how these forces converge to create systemic barriers in bilingual teacher preparation, focusing especially on certification policies, opportunities for linguistic development, and the sociopolitical ideologies that continue to constrain progress in the field.

Research Advances and Persistent Mismatches

Darling-Hammond (2016) traced how teacher education research has evolved from simplistic studies of teaching methods to more complex inquiries into decision-making processes of teachers, professional judgment, and pedagogy that is contextually grounded. In her work she has

demonstrated that although this growing knowledge base has influenced some policy improvements such as enhanced professional development and more rigorous preparation standards, the implementation of these policies remains uneven and disconnected from the evidence base. She has cautioned that “policy moves have been widely disparate” (Darling-Hammond, 2016, p. 88) and urges an approach that grounds teacher education policy in rigorous research and contextual realities. These disparities are especially pronounced in bilingual teacher education, where policies contradict the very research that supports the benefits of bilingualism, biliteracy, and culturally sustaining pedagogy. As the United States experiences a steady increase in the population of emergent bi-/multilingual learners (NCES, 2023), the need for well-prepared bilingual teachers also increases. However, this rising demand has not translated into an equitable or coherent system for preparing and certifying bilingual educators (Rutherford-Quach et al., 2021).

Language Ideologies, Policy Contradictions, and Bilingual Teacher Shortage

A core example of the mismatch in research–policy–practice is how Spanish—the most widely-spoken heritage language in U.S. bilingual programs—has been simultaneously celebrated in policy discourse and restricted in educational practice. English-only laws, monoglossic pedagogies, and deep-rooted language ideologies continue to stigmatize Spanish, contributing to intergenerational language loss even among students who might otherwise become bilingual teachers (Alfaro, 2018; Johannessen et al., 2016). This contradiction undercuts research that has consistently documented the academic, cognitive, and social benefits of bilingualism (e.g., Freire et al., 2024; García, 2009), thereby perpetuating the shortage in the bilingual teacher workforce. This systemic inconsistency is exacerbated by certification policies that are misaligned with both research and the lived realities of bilingual teacher candidates. For example, teacher preparation programs frequently fail to adequately support the linguistic development required for bilingual content instruction (de Jong & Gao, 2019). This leads to a troubling cycle wherein few candidates meet the demanding proficiency standards, which results in persistent shortages, which in turn compromises the quality of bilingual instruction in K–12 classrooms.

Similarly, Muñoz-Muñoz et al. (2023) explored how translanguaging approaches, embedded in teacher preparation in California, challenge dominant monoglossic perspectives. They found that even policies with equity-oriented language, such as California’s Proposition 58 and the English Learner Roadmap,⁷ are interpreted through a monolingual lens in practice, which limits their transformative potential. Their work has drawn attention to the opportunity that bilingual teacher educators have to act as policy mediators by using coursework and clinical experiences to cultivate critical policy awareness and advocacy skills among future teachers.

⁷ Proposition 58 (2016) allows California public schools to create language programs for all students and requires them to involve parents and the community in planning. Its goal is to help students learn English and receive a high-quality education that prepares them for a global economy (see the California Department of Education, <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/ml/caedge.asp>). Similarly, the California English Learner Roadmap is a state policy that guides schools in supporting English learners. It replaces the 1998 policy, promotes high-quality instruction, values students’ home languages and cultures, and makes educating English learners a shared responsibility across the school system (see the California Department of Education, <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/ml/elroadmappolicy.asp>).

Certification Policies and Equity Challenges

Certification structures illustrate the fractured nature of the research–policy–practice continuum. Only 15 states currently require bilingual certification, endorsement, or both, whereas eight others permit bilingual placements with only an English as a second language (ESL) endorsement, despite a body of research that indicates that these roles require distinct pedagogical knowledge and language skills (Rutherford-Quach et al., 2021). Requirements for bilingual certification vary widely, with disparities in coursework, field experiences, and proficiency testing that disproportionately affect bilingual teacher candidates. Inconsistencies also extend to the racial and linguistic demographics of the teaching workforce. Currently, 75% of teacher candidates are White, and many teacher education programs are not designed to meet the cultural and pedagogical needs of racially and linguistically diverse candidates (Anderson & Aronson, 2019). Coursework often reflects the assumptions of White monolingual candidates, leaving bilingual candidates of color feeling isolated and unsupported within traditional certification programs. In addition, bilingual candidates are sometimes required to take additional courses that incur additional time and cost for completion that may deter their pursuit of such programs. Additional exams compound the cost barriers as well. In Texas, bilingual candidates must complete two additional certification exams beyond those required for general educators, which represents an added financial burden of \$232. The Bilingual Target Language Proficiency Test, which assesses content-specific Spanish across multiple domains, presents a significant hurdle in that it requires candidates to demonstrate deep academic Spanish knowledge in subjects ranging from U.S. history to mathematics.

Yet most bilingual teacher preparation programs do not provide sufficient coursework or field-based opportunities for developing this specialized language proficiency (Arroyo-Romano, 2016; Caldas, 2021). A lack of bilingual classrooms in some regions has led to decreased field-experience requirements. In the Central Valley of California, for example, some program requirements only necessitate 20 hours in a bilingual classroom (California State University Fresno, n.d.) because of the low number of bilingual classrooms, despite some districts serving large demographics of linguistically diverse students. By contrast, Arizona offers more flexible proficiency assessments that allow candidates to choose from three different exams to demonstrate their Spanish abilities (Arizona Department of Education, n.d.). These differences reveal a policy landscape that lacks national coherence and fails to equitably support aspiring bilingual teachers.

Equity and Alignment in Bilingual Teacher Education

Despite these certification challenges, promising practices point toward a research-informed, equity-driven future for bilingual teacher education. Programs in West Texas, for example, require a full-year clinical placement in additive dual-language settings, pairing candidates with experienced mentors and bilingual supervisors. Guerrero (2023) has argued for teaching bilingual methods courses in Spanish, whereas Arroyo-Romano (2022) calls for the hiring of biliterate faculty who can mentor and support candidates' academic language development.

Other researchers have advocated for assignments that, while honoring the dynamic language repertoires and practices (Aquino-Sterling & Rodríguez-Valls, 2016), also develop and assess “pedagogical Spanish”—defined as “the language and literacy competencies bilingual teachers require for the effective work of teaching in Spanish across the curriculum in K–12 bilingual schools and for competently meeting the professional language demands of working with students, colleagues, administrators, parents, and the larger bilingual school community” (Aquino-Sterling, 2016, p. 51)—ensuring that candidates develop both linguistic and instructional competence. To dismantle barriers and create greater alignment between research and practice, bilingual teacher education programs must rethink how coursework, clinical practice, and institutional structures reflect the realities of the field in the following ways:

- Integrate content-based Spanish instruction across the curriculum.
- Provide scaffolded clinical experiences in classrooms that are culturally and linguistically sustaining.
- Seek institutional and external funding to reduce financial burdens.
- Build learning communities that center the experiences and identities of bilingual teacher candidates.
- Engage in critical policy analysis that prepares future educators as policy advocates.

These steps are not simple, especially in a political climate shaped by anti-bilingual ideologies, systemic underinvestment, and increasing demands for standardization. However, without a strategic realignment of research, policy, and practice, educators risk perpetuating cycles of underrepresentation and of under-preparation that harm racialized–minoritized emergent bi-/multilingual students and the communities that bilingual education is meant to serve.

Bridging the Gap as an Ethical Imperative

Ultimately, bridging the research–policy–practice continuum in bilingual teacher education is not only a technical challenge but also an ethical imperative. Emergent bilingual students deserve well-prepared teachers who advocate for their linguistic, cultural, and academic development. Achieving this vision requires that we confront the sociopolitical ideologies and institutional structures that have long hindered the field. It also demands that we invest in new models of bilingual teacher education that are coherent, culturally sustaining, and guided by a vision of educational equity for all learners.

The State of Texas as a Case in Point

Texas, home to the second-largest population of emergent bilingual English learners (EBELs) in the United States, offers a particular case study of the systemic inequities that arise when educational research, policy, and practice are misaligned. Despite Latinx-Hispanic students representing 52.8% of the 5.4 million students enrolled in Texas public schools, their academic outcomes consistently reflect historical and ongoing structural marginalization. These students also constitute 65.9% of all youth labeled “at risk of dropping out” (Intercultural Development Research

Association, 2023), with graduation rates far below those of their non-Latinx peers (78.2% vs. 90.3%; Texas Education Agency, 2023).⁸ Of particular concern, only 38% of Latinx-Hispanic EBELs met grade-level standards in reading and mathematics on the 2019 Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (Jensen & Doolittle, 2019). These disparities cannot be attributed to student deficiencies alone. Instead, these disparities are rooted in systemic failures across macrolevel domains that include restrictive language policies (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Mathias, 2022), chronic underfunding of public education (Baker & DiCarlo, 2020; Rolle & Jiménez-Castellanos, 2014), high-stakes accountability systems (Menken, 2006; Valenzuela, 2005), exclusionary discipline policies (Lenderman & Hawkins, 2021), a shortage of high-quality bilingual programs and certified teachers (Latham Sikes, 2023a), and a lack of materials and pedagogies that are culturally and linguistically affirming (Mathias, 2022; Latham Sikes & Villanueva, 2021).

Despite the urgent need, legislative efforts to address these issues have remained limited or superficial. Although strategic proposals such as Senate Bill 560 and IDRA's "Road Map for Texas Education" (Latham Sikes, 2023b) recommend expanded investment in bilingual teacher preparation, program development, and instructional resources, concrete action at the state level has been minimal. To date, no new legislative support has been enacted, aside from a modest expansion of tuition assistance for bilingual teacher candidates (Intercultural Development Research Association, 2023a). This policy inertia persists within a broader political climate marked by efforts to restrict DEI programs, censor classroom discourse, and increase school policing, all of which undermine equitable and culturally sustaining education. Although bilingual education has historically been politicized, Arellano et al. (2024) emphasized that "politicizing education hurts students"—a reality all educational stakeholders must recognize and work to change (p. 32).

Teacher Quality and the Role of Bilingual Educators

Among these structural challenges, the shortage of qualified bilingual teachers is arguably one of the most urgent problems that Texas education faces. Teachers are widely recognized as the most important in-school factor that affects student achievement (Burroughs et al., 2019), yet Texas continues to suffer from a decades-long shortage of bilingual teachers. Bilingual/ESL has been designated a critical shortage area in Texas every year since 1990–1991 (Horn et al., 2021), a situation only worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic, which increased class sizes and teacher workloads. These shortages are further deepened by a profound demographic gap between Texas students and teachers. Although Latinx students made up 52.9% of the student population in 2022–2023 (TEA, 2023a), the majority of Texas teachers remain White and monolingual. In addition, although recent data have indicated that White teachers now represent 53.68% of the workforce (down from over 65% in 2022), significant mismatches remain (TEA, 2024). This persistent diversity gap underscores the state's failure to cultivate and retain a linguistically and racially diverse teaching force that reflects the students it serves.

⁸ Swadener & Lubeck (1995) offer a strong critique of the deficit-oriented label "at risk," arguing that it stigmatizes children and families, and replace it with the strength-based label "at Promise"—emphasizing potential, not perceived failure.

Certification Barriers and the Cost of Entry

Texas's bilingual teacher certification process is rigorous and, for many prospective teachers, extremely expensive. Candidates must first obtain a general content and grade-level teaching certificate and then complete additional requirements for bilingual certification that include coursework, the Science of Teaching Reading exam, and the Bilingual Target Language Proficiency Test. The financial and logistical burdens of certification can deter potential candidates, especially those from the most underrepresented communities in the teaching force. Although the Teacher Incentive Allotment offers the potential for teachers to earn significant salary bonuses (ranging from \$3,000 to \$32,000, depending on designation), such incentives are not evenly accessible. The path to earning these distinctions is complex and can favor teachers in high-performing or better-resourced schools. Moreover, these incentives do not offset the broader systemic barriers that continue to deter or push out potential bilingual educators. In recognition of the persistent shortage, Texas Administrative Code §89.1205(a) has allowed districts to apply for exceptions to the bilingual education program requirement when certified teachers are unavailable. These waivers facilitate temporary alternative programs that can be far less effective than dual-language or bilingual models, further institutionalizing unequal access to education for emergent bilingual students.

Material Gaps and Uncompensated Labor

Even when certified bilingual teachers are hired, they face under-resourced classrooms and added labor demands. Many bilingual educators are tasked with translating curriculum materials, adapting lessons without adequate support, and handling communication with parents as well as administrative responsibilities multilingually, all without additional compensation. A lack of Spanish-language instructional materials in content areas such as math and science remains a major barrier to effective bilingual teaching, especially in rural and underfunded districts. Case in point, Texas serves over one million English learners—more than the total school enrollments of 35 U.S. states (NCES, 2022)—yet funding for bilingual and ESL programs has not kept pace with this growth. Even with Title III support and categorical funding increases, available resources remain insufficient to address both the magnitude and complexity of EBELs' needs. Programs designed to develop English proficiency fall short in supporting multilingualism or sustaining students' home languages, despite ample research that has advocated for additive bilingual education as the gold standard (García, 2009; Thomas & Collier, 2002).

Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice Alignment

The Texas case clearly illustrates the consequences of a fractured research–policy–practice continuum. Despite decades of empirical evidence that supports bilingualism and culturally sustaining pedagogy, the state has failed to align its teacher preparation infrastructure, funding mechanisms, and educational policies with this research. The result is a system that continues to marginalize emergent bilingual learners—particularly Latinx-Hispanic students—while placing

untenable burdens on the teachers tasked with supporting them. To close these gaps, Texas (and other states) must adopt a coherent, equity-focused policy agenda that reflects what scholar-researchers and educator-practitioners know from research and honors the linguistic and cultural wealth of its student population. The following are some recommendations:

- Strengthen bilingual teacher pipelines by removing financial and logistical certification barriers.
- Expand access to linguistically appropriate instructional materials across all subjects.
- Increase investments in bilingual programs and dual-language models.
- Recruit and retain bilingual teachers of color through targeted scholarships, mentorship, and institutional support.
- Develop policies that affirm multilingualism and reject subtractive, English-only ideologies.

Without bold, coordinated action, Texas risks continuing to reproduce educational inequalities. However, if the state acts on the insights offered by research and genuinely invests in bilingual teacher education, it can become a national leader in building equitable and linguistically just schools for all students.

Conclusion

The research-policy-practice nexus in the field of education reveals a complex and fragmented landscape where the promise of research is routinely undermined by political ideologies, systemic inequities, and implementation challenges (Honig, 2006; Penuel & Gallagher, 2017). As we demonstrate in this critical analysis, the often-contradictory interplay between research, policy, and practice also holds true in the domains of bilingual education and bilingual teacher education in the U.S. Despite research affirming the cognitive, academic, and sociocultural value and benefits of bilingualism and biliteracy, this evidence has been generally ignored by the resurgence of restrictive, assimilationist, and market-driven policy frameworks that inform the education of bi-/multilingual learners (Gándara & Hopkins, 2010). These contradictions manifest in education programs and teacher education preparation systems, where implementation falls short of equity-minded, culturally sustaining, and linguistically responsive ideals.

Moving toward an equitable, coherent system requires that the research-policy-practice nexus be reconceptualized in a way that values bi-/multilingualism as an educational and societal asset and that centers on the lived experiences and needs of racialized-minoritized students and educators. To strengthen this continuum, “knowledge brokers”—scholar-researchers, teacher educators, and community leaders—must strategically translate research into actionable policy and practice (Cooper & Shewchuk, 2015, p. 1.). Also necessary is sustained collaboration across sectors to align federal and state mandates with local contexts and to empower educators with the training, resources, and institutional support they need to deliver effective bilingual instruction.

Ultimately, bridging the gaps across the research-policy-practice continuum is not only a matter of educational effectiveness but also a matter of social justice. Bilingual education and

bilingual teacher education can serve as transformative forces for emergent bi-/multilingual learners attending the U.S. public education system and for all students. For the U.S. education system—and particularly K–12 bilingual education and bilingual teacher education—to reach its full potential, there must be a strategic and sustained commitment to research-informed, equity-minded, and culturally and linguistically relevant and sustaining policies and practices that promote sustained and long-term academic achievement and human flourishing.

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